

Message Text

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ACTION EB-08

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 NEA-10 ISO-00 CAB-02 CIAE-00
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FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3993

INFO AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY ROME

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SOFIA 0055

BRUSSELS AND ROME FOR FAA

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: EAIR, LY, BU

SUBJECT: BALKAN AIR CRASH IN LIBYA

REF: 77 TRIPOLI 1527 (NOTAL)

1. REPRESENTATIVE OF WESTERN AIRLINE WITH GOOD BULGARIAN
AIRLINE CONTACTS PROVIDED EMBOFF WITH ALTERNATE ACCOUNT
OF DEC 2 CRASH OF BALKAN BULGARIAN AIRLINES TU-154 (REFTEL),
BASED ON HIS CONVERSATIONS WITH BULGARIAN OFFICIALS.

2. ACCORDING TO HIM, DESTINATION OF FLIGHT WAS BENGHAZI,
NOT TRIPOLI. BENINA/BENGHAZI AIRPORT WAS COMPLETELY SOCKED
IN BY SANDSTORM AND BENINA TOWER DIVERTED FLIGHT TO TOBRUQ,
ADVISING PILOT THAT THEY WOULD ADVISE TOBRUQ. WHEN PLANE
REACHED TOBRUQ, THERE WERE NO LIGHTS ON AT AIRPORT AND NO
RESPONSE FROM TOWER. BY THIS TIME, HAVING HELD FIRST OVER
BENINA AND THEN OVER TOBRUQ, FUEL RAN OUT AND PLANE
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CRASHED. BULGARIAN SOURCES TOLD WESTERN AIRLINE REP
THAT PLANE HAD BEEN FLYING WITH NORMAL FUEL RESERVE,
SUFFICIENT FOR ONE AND ONE-HALF HOURS FLYING, AND NOT
PARTICULARLY HEAVY LOAD OF PASSENGERS ONLY, NO FREIGHT.
CASUALTY FIGURE HE HAD WAS 56, WITH PILOT AND CREW ALL
SURVIVING.

3. BULGARIAN TEAM HEADED BY BALKANAIR GENERAL DIRECTOR, MAJOR GENERAL SHTERYU SHTEREV, FLEW TO LIBYA ON DAY OF CRASH, DEC 2, ACCORDING TO SORUCE. SHTEREV WAS REPORTEDLY INITIALLY REFUSED PERMISSION TO MEET WITH PILOT AND CREW. BULGARIANS SPECULATED TO SOURCE THAT ATTRIBUTION OF CRASH PURELY TO WEATHER WAS BEING COOKED UP BY TWO GOVERNMENTS AT POLITICAL LEVEL, TO AVOID EMBARRASSING LIBYANS.

4. PILGRIM TRAFFIC IS GOOD SOURCE OF INCOME FOR BALKANAIR, NORMALLY UNDEREMPLOYED DURING NON-TOURIST WINTER MONTHS. SOME 6 TO 8 TU-154S AND 3 TO 4 IL-18S ARE ENGAGED IN PILGRIM TRAFFIC FROM MID-NOVEMBER TO FIRST WEEK OF FEBRUARY. WESTERN AIRLINE SOURCES CONFIRM THAT PLANES IN THAT TRAFFIC WERE MAINTENANCE-CHECKED IN THE USSR AND REPAINTED IN BULGARIA PRIOR TO BEGINNING CONVOY.

5. COMMENT: WESTERN AIRLINE SOURCE HOLDS NO BRIEF FOR BULGARIAN AND HAS PROVIDED USEFUL, RELIABLE INFORMATION IN PAST. AT SAME TIME, HIS INFORMATION CAME FROM BULGARIAN SOURCES WHO WISH TO CLEAR THEMSELVES OF FAULT IN CRASH. EMBASSY THUS PROVIDED INFORMATION ABOVE AS POSSIBLE ALTERNATE INTERPRETATION OF EVENTS, TO BE PLACED ALONGSIDE LIBYAN REPORT (REFTEL).
GARTHOFF

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